

# Classics without context: an exercise in ancient art

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*'A sculpture regarded for centuries as one of the most stirring of the ancient world may be a forgery perpetrated by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo', exclaimed The Sunday Times with an equal dose of horror and excitement. The sculpture is 'The Laocoon', concrete embodiment of the Trojan priest of the same name whose warning about the wooden horse gets him and his two sons strangled by sea-serpents in book 2 of the Aeneid. Few sculptures have received so much attention. Since its 'discovery' in Rome in pieces in 1506, it has become the classic case-study for exploring the relationship between art and text, pain and beauty. Sure, scholars have disagreed about what it looked like in antiquity (especially about the position of Laocoon's missing right arm which was most recently reset in 1942 to bend at the elbow). But believe the latest bombshell, and all of their work is meaningless – isn't it? Michelangelo may be 'hot stuff' but his work falls outside of the 'Classical Civilisation' syllabus. The Laocoon would have no place in books on classical art. Instead it becomes a 'fake'.*

News flash (24 April 2004)

## Throwing the baby out with the bath-water

Before abandoning Laocoon to the grasp of students of Renaissance studies, let's bring on a second famous sculpture, the so-called 'Apollo Belvedere' to help him. I should perhaps admit that most of the points I am about to make could have been made by Laocoon himself. But as my opening suggests, he has rather been 'done to death' recently! If anything, my chosen case-study has an even slipperier foothold in antiquity than the tragic Trojan – though this only serves to strengthen the lessons to be learned from my arguments. So what if we are unable to place these sculptures in an 'original' historical context, or say for certain anymore that 'the Laocoon' was made in classical antiquity? There is a sense in which its complicated history of reconstruction (e.g. its new right arm and the visual impact this has) makes it a 'fake' whether Michelangelo carved the body or not. Not only this, but it has also done more than much 'ancient' sculpture to highlight and shape the ways in which the classical world has been understood and interpreted through the visual. Are we going to throw the myriad of literary and visual responses to 'the Laocoon' out of the window? These responses and indeed the newspaper headline above arguably are 'Classics' in the sixteenth to twenty-first centuries. Such problems alert us to the complexities of looking at (and of writing a history of) art.

## Winckelmann's Apollo

So what can the 'Apollo Belvedere' offer us in terms of answers or questions? Like so many of the superstars which now adorn collections of classical sculpture, the first extant record of this

statue locates it in the Italian Renaissance. Worse perhaps than the Laocoon, we have no idea when or where it was dug up, or where it was displayed in antiquity. Early photographs show the statue holding a scroll in his left hand and touching the top of its accompanying tree stump and python with the other. But both of these gestures are as modern as the fig-leaf. Today, these restorations have been removed. But this authenticity too is deceptive – the surface of the statue having been treated with a stain-removing polish. What colour were his hair and cloak originally? For in antiquity many sculptures (from temple pediments to the Prima Porta statue of Augustus) were painted. Even its name is a modern invention – after the Belvedere courtyard in the Vatican, where it has stood since 1511, across from the Laocoon.

The history of this ancient statue – its post-Renaissance history – is fascinating. One of the main reasons for this is the way in which it is bound up with the figure and fame of Winckelmann. Winckelmann was a German scholar who lived in the eighteenth century and spent an important chunk of his working life in Rome. There he wrote *The History of the Art of Antiquity*, a work which was first published in German in 1764 and then swiftly translated into French and Italian after his premature death a few years later. No book has done more to shape the way in which classical sculpture has been studied and it's not an exaggeration, I think, to claim that it was its enduring influence that really made our statue. In Winckelmann's eyes, the Apollo's graceful youthfulness and lightness of pose (enhanced as it now was by the whiteness of the marble and the delicate spread of fingers on its restored right hand) gave it a grandeur that captured better than almost any other object the creative freedom associated with democratic Athens. As a result of his intense response, he claimed that the Apollo was a Greek original snatched from Greece by Rome's most dastardly emperor, Nero. It became a symbol both of the tyranny of Rome and the champion of all things Greek.

300 years later and you will often read that the Apollo Belvedere is a Roman copy of a statue made by a Greek sculptor, Leochares, who was working in the 320s B.C. for Alexander the Great. What's the evidence for these conclusions? a) The surviving statue is fourth-century in style but made of *Italian* marble and b) two authors writing under the Roman Empire and for different reasons from one another, Pliny and Pausanias, mention a sculpture of Apollo by Leochares suggesting that it was well-known in their period. However, how do we know for sure that our statue is a copy of this well-known work? How close would it have to be to the original to be a 'copy'? Or how different, for it to be hailed as 'novel' or 'independent'? It is hard when the object to which we are comparing it no longer exists! Look up the 'Apollo Belvedere' tomorrow and Winckelmann's legacy lives on: you will find it in books on Greek art not Roman as though a 'stand-in' for its supposed ancestor. Safer perhaps is to think about it as a Roman or post-Renaissance creation rather than as evidence for the fourth century B.C.

### Finding him a home

Were we to find out where in ancient Rome the Apollo Belvedere was once displayed, and with what else it was displayed, Roman specialists would want to do something with it, regardless of whether it had been stolen by Nero or designed explicitly for its context. It would be nice to know who made it and what they thought of Leochares (if anything at all). But it would not be necessary. Instead art-historical enquiry could focus on the reuse, translation and Roman impact of its content together with its style. Here are some things to think about: was it in a temple, in which case it might be a cult statue? Or was it to be found in a site associated with Augustus, an emperor who was often linked to Apollo, in which case it might also be an imperial image? Was it in the garden of a villa where any religious symbolism might have bowed to the decorative or – more politically perhaps – to the statue's capacity to stand for Roman domination (the fact that Rome was now so dominant over Greece or the owner of the villa so dominant over the rest of Rome that they could make the 'religious' 'recreational')? In this way, we would begin to get at meaning, rewriting as we did so the script that says that there is only *one* answer and one which is tightly tied to the moment of production, with a script that says that there are *many* potential 'readings' shaped by the statue's reception.

Having said all of that, we know neither where the statue was displayed, nor its date. We are at sea when it comes to context and function. What can students of classical culture learn from the Apollo Belvedere? Before we 'bin' him, let us have a quick look at a couple of visual responses to Apollo from the height of its popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the nineteenth century, its softness was often interpreted as a sign of decadence or spur to immorality. Perhaps we can understand why when we analyse his appearance in the 'Council of the Gods', painted by the Flemish artist Rubens in about 1623. For Rubens, divine Apollo is the Apollo Belvedere or rather the Apollo Belvedere as it has been 'restored' or enhanced a century before. It is as though the restoration has reanimated the statue as it struts across the foreground in glorious technicolour (its right hand which grazes the top of the marble tree stump now steadying the subject in a way which verges on the camp). Rubens has revived him further: his hair is painted gold and his cloak dipped in scarlet so as to emphasise the contours of the male body. Michelangelo too had found inspiration in this body for a drawing of a male youth, now in the Louvre in Paris. Rubens' very use of the Apollo Belvedere and our reaction to him bear witness to the stimulus of classical art.

My second example post-dates Winckelmann and is one of a number of portraits of European aristocracy painted by Italian artist, Pompeo Batoni, towards the end of the eighteenth-century. This one shows a Scottish baron, again in scarlet, pointing to a famous classical statue known at the time as 'Cleopatra', and thus to his own knowledge, education and worldliness. In the eighteenth-century, those who could afford it would often undertake a 'Grand Tour', visiting Italy to 'sow their wild oats' and see the sights. Classical statues were high on the 'must-see' list. Familiarity with them was indicative of status. Some, however, offered a higher return than others. All of the pieces in the picture – 'Cleopatra', the so-called 'Belvedere Antinous', the Laocoon and the Apollo – could be found in the Vatican Museums but had also been singled out for special admiration by Winckelmann. It is presumably not an accident that the baron's outstretched arms echo those of the Apollo, the cane and dog replacing the stump and python. The sitter is flattered by association with the superstars of what is already 'the classical canon'.

### Learning by example

We may not be able to put the Apollo Belvedere back into its original context but we can do what Winckelmann did and try

to fit it into 'the history of art' – even if, in doing this, we expose the difficulties of writing an art history. This is an important lesson to learn. The Apollo and Laocoon are not unique in their numbers of problems: many of the best-known ancient sculptures have been heavily restored (much more so than we would know from most museum labels) while more of them carry no record at all of where they were originally displayed. But the restoration, adoration and location of both of them in catalogues of Greek art are crucial factors in thinking about what we are doing and looking at in studying ancient sculpture. Not for nothing did Winckelmann call the Apollo 'the highest ideal of art'. It is judgments like this that have made our discipline what it is today. It is naïve to imagine that an object is now what it was in the eighteenth century or in the Roman or Greek period. By wrapping ourselves in responses ancient and modern we find new channels of communication with classical antiquity.

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